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## Brief Review on Morality and Culture

Sushreesmita Samal  
NIT, Rourkela, India

### **Abstract:**

*Moral conflicts present themselves to us in every walk of life. To resolve them either we collide with each other or we fall back on our set of moral codes. We find people disagreeing on the grounds of morality. We find different communities differing in their moral judgments. This deters the possibility of a universal morality and adds leverage to the idea of multiple moralities varying with different situations and different cultures. Are morality, not innate, then and only a cultural by product? Yet, we all have the innate mechanism to use moral norms to make a moral judgment. Which parts or mechanisms of the moral machinery are innate and which are culturally mutable?*

### **1. Introduction**

If I killed somebody today over a dispute, would you say it is wrong? Probably, yes. But, the Guhuku-Gama of New Guinea would not refrain from such killing. While, certain other headhunting clans indulge in killing innocent people as recreational activity (Prinz, 2006).

How appealing would we find a sport entailing man fighting each other unto death? Would we be able to watch as spectators and applaud? Ancient Romans reveled in watching gladiators indulging in mutual slaughter.

We raise hue and cry over sentencing to death a terrorist who killed innocent people claiming that killing is wrong, while, widows were pushed into the funeral pyres of their husbands in the practice of Sati in ancient India.

What are these contrasting anecdotes? Diversity in the manifestation of correct and wrong. What is that? This is the question answered by morality. What we have seen here is wide variation in the expression of morality among different societies, different cultures. While, in the contemporary world, we would think cannibalism, polygamy, incest, honor killing, slave labor and a multitude of such practices wrong, there are still different cultures in the world that practice them. At less astounding levels are differences in cultures that are burning moral issues even today like euthanasia, transgenesis, the widely practiced death penalty, even non-vegetarianism.

Just why is there such conflict over moral judgments? Don't we all have a fundamental sense of universal right and wrong that are objectively determined and are present in the cosmos as absolutes? Don't we all inherit this moral affiliation by merely being humans? But, the appearance of frequent moral conflicts between cultures and between individuals tells us otherwise. This is called moral relativism. In that case, isn't morality an innate cognitive aspect of man like language was argued to be by Chomsky? Or is it so, but only culturally conditioned to result in diverse manifestations in the same way that different languages have developed? In this paper, an attempt is made to answer these questions about morality and the influence of culture and the possible theories behind such a moral apparatus are discussed.

### **2. Cultural Diversity in Morality**

There are a lot of variations in moral judgments that have been found across cultures. Anthropological studies have drawn our attention to nearly every behavior that is considered immoral in the contemporary world to be considered acceptable in some culture. Besides these observations, psychological experiments have been conducted to show differences in morality.

Shweder et al. studied differences between Indians and Americans in their moral judgments about scenarios, which we would consider as breaches of codes of conduct. For instance, Indians of the Brahmin caste in Bhubaneswar found it acceptable behavior when a husband beats up his disobedient wife, while Americans found it unacceptable. But, the same Indians found it unacceptable when the wife ate with the husband's elder brother, while Americans found nothing to object. Based on these sets of studies, the authors proposed three moral rhetoric, namely, "ethics of autonomy", "ethics of community" and "ethics of divinity". Ethics of autonomy are related to preservation of the individual's rights and justice etc. Ethics of community are related to the duty of the individual to the community, social role preservation, interdependence etc. Ethics of divinity are related to themes of sin, sanctity etc. In their studies on Americans and Indians, the authors find differences in moral judgments between the cultures when themes involved in two rhetorics like individual rights and hierarchy or sanctity come in conflict, even though, otherwise the two cultures agree on most other moral judgments.

Vasquez et al. (2001) compared the role played by these moral rhetorics in moral judgments made by Filipinos and Americans. They found that Americans make moral judgments largely based on the rhetoric of ethics of autonomy, while Filipinos make judgments based on all three rhetorics. The authors attribute this difference to the cultural differences between the Americans and Filipinos, that is, the Filipinos have a multicultural heritage that has an anchor in all three rhetorics. The Filipinos are a collectivist

society, which lends to the ethics of community; they are a Catholic society, which lends to the ethics of divinity; and they were colonized by the West, which has lent to the ethics of autonomy. Irrespective of whether such attribution is substantial or not, the noteworthy observation here is that the use of moral rhetoric in making moral judgments varies between different societies depending on the cultural variations in the society.

In a study using economic games, Henrich et al. (2005) conducted experiments across different cultures varying in geographical locations from Africa to South America. One of the games used was the ultimatum game. In this game, one person is told to share a pie with a stranger. If the stranger accepts the offer, both get their shares, else, both leave with nothing. In a different version of the game, called the dictator game, the person who receives is given no option of accepting the offer. This is to check if the giver is giving out of fear of rejection or a sense of fairness. In a third game, the Public Goods Game, subjects were asked to contribute to or withdraw from a public share, after which the public share was doubled in amount and shared equally among all participants. It was found that the Machiguenga of Peru made and accepted lower offers than Americans. The Au of New Guinea rejected both unfair and hyper-fair offers, that is, offers that were greater than 50%, while Americans accepted hyper-fair offers. This shows that the game was played not with the aim of maximizing utility but with a sense of fairness, which also differed substantially among societies.

Forsyth (2008) points out morally complex situations in which cross cultural differences in morality become elicited. While in the US, people acknowledged that use of copyrighted material was wrong even though they used them; people in Hong Kong thought it was illegal but not wrong. What would be considered bribe in the US, that is, taking money for smoothing out a business transaction and ventures into immoral territory is considered acceptable practice in Haiti and Thailand. When some US and Russian students were evaluated on how they reacted to employees who lied about the work they did, the US students were more intolerant than the Russian students. A survey found that Austrians did not think it morally incorrect when a male boss promoted a female employee when she agreed to see him socially while Americans thought it immoral.

Forsyth states that the moral tendencies of people are affected by their moral philosophies, that is, meta-cognition of moral affiliations of an individual affects moral judgment. Forsyth defines this under his Ethics Position Theory and has devised a questionnaire that can find individual ethical tendencies based on the degree of moral idealism or relativism they believe in. Moral idealists would think there are absolute moral principles that are to be adhered to, while moral relativists would think that moral norms can change circumstantially. Forsyth has collated data from 29 countries and found that westerners have a greater tendency to find exceptions from idealism in moral judgments, while Easterners placed individual moral values and circumstantial forces above universal ethical principles. He also found that in Middle Eastern countries, participants' responses indicated a greater adherence to idealism but also showed moral relativism based on situation. Forsyth also says that this data conforms to previous evidence on the nature of the different cultures and one could predict the data from established cultural dimensions for the countries like individualist vs. collectivist.

How much value such meta-cognition of moral propensities is to determining actual moral idealism or relativism is in question here. Knowing ones moral tendencies is similar to being asked to make a moral judgment about a morally conflicting scenario. In both cases, judgments are made based on what we would consider right and wrong when faced by a situation, for which, we have to imagine ourselves in certain abstract scenarios, take perspective and assess the situation based on our knowledge of what we think is right and wrong. Moral judgments intrinsically employ meta-cognition of moral tendencies. But, we often notice that people do tend to behave in a way that they deem morally wrong. This implies that knowledge of one's moral predisposition or values is not sufficient as a determinant of moral behavior at least with the individual's moral frame of reference. For instance, the American students who thought that using copyrighted material was wrong continued to use such material. In that case, how valid are moral judgments? Do we tend to judge against moral absolutes that we ourselves tend to deviate from? If moral judgment and moral behavior cannot be reconciled, does it posit the existence of a moral universal? It could also simply mean that we are deviating from our own frame of moral reference, which is more likely. In our everyday lives, we tend to make mistakes and feel guilty about such deviations from our moral code. This implies that moral or immoral behavior cannot tell us about moral relativism or moral idealism. This brings to fore an important drawback of anthropological studies that has been pointed out by moral philosophers. If cultures are found practicing what we would call immoral, it does not necessarily mean that they think it is moral. Their behavior could be forced by factual beliefs even though they think the practice is immoral. For instance, headhunting clans could be indulging in the practice of headhunting not because they think it moral but because they think the gods demand such sacrifice out of them (Moody-Adams, 2007). The practices of any culture could also be driven by situational forces. The Inuits of the Tundra need not necessarily think infanticide is moral. They might still practice it because they are forced to do so to avoid starvation or some such impending disadvantage to survival by keeping the child alive.

But, we have seen in other instances that even in the absence of situational factors and bizarre beliefs, there is disagreement in the moralities seen across cultures.

### 3. Moral Relativism and the Evolution of Morality

Moral relativism refers to the vast disagreement in morality seen among people and among different groups of people. It talks about the existence of multiple moralities. There are no absolutes regarding whether moral judgments are right or wrong. These judgments are based on a moral frame of reference that varies between people and between groups. But, would adopting a view of moral relativism mean that we deny the existence of any moral universals?

There are three positions one can take on morality and the evolution of morality. One position is that there are universal moral norms. But, this would be met with contradiction by variations in cultural diversity. One could argue saying cultural differences enforce different situations on people shaping or altering their moral tendencies. But, making such an argument would amount to losing the position that there are universal moral norms. Taking this position is, hence, bleak in the very making.

There are agreements between moral values too. There are certain moral values that are common to most cultures. For instance, 'stealing is bad' is a moral tenet that appears to be universally valid. We nurse the greed for an inherent moral being within us. If we peel off all the layers of culture and nurture in man, we would be left with the core moral being. This being would have the fundamental moral principles that drive us all. This is another position we take by assuming such a core moral being exists. We are assuming that there are universal moral norms that are inherent in us, but these are influenced and modified by cultural forces. A third position we could take is that all moral norms have culturally evolved and that we inherently do not have any moral values, that is, we are not biologically predisposed to moral norms.

#### **4. Morality as an Emotional Attitude**

Let us consider here an interesting position on moral relativism that is subscribed to by Prinz. Prinz (2006) argues for an emotional basis of moral judgments. When we find something morally wrong, it evokes a negative sentiment in us. He points to earlier research suggesting that we experience anger and disgust when morally wrong actions are performed by others and experience guilt and shame when we perform morally wrong actions.

Prinz quotes some studies for evidence of the brain basis of the relationship between emotion and moral judgments. Moll, de Oliveira-Souza, and Eslinger found brain activity in areas associated with emotion when participants classified as right or wrong moral judgments as against factual judgments. Sanfey et al. found brain activity in areas associated with emotion when subjects playing an Ultimatum game were presented with unfair offers. Prinz argues that emotional reactions determine our moral positions. We have negative emotions towards those scenarios we find wrong.

Prinz claims that emotions are both necessary and sufficient for moral appraisal. For the sufficiency argument he presents a study by Murphy, Haidt and Bjorkland as evidence. One would normally think that we can make moral judgments by reasoning on our moral tenets. This study found that reasoning tends to fail sometimes and yet we are able to make moral judgments. Participants were asked to justify consensual incest between siblings. For every justification the participant gave, a counterargument was given to nullify its premise. It was found that even though the participants couldn't justify it, most of them continued to say that it was wrong because it was disgusting. Prinz used this to argue that a negative emotion is sufficient to make moral judgments. He quotes the example of psychopaths to support the necessity argument. In a study by Blair et al., it was found that psychopaths are not disturbed by photographs that distress us; they are less responsive to pain and are not suitable for fear-conditioning. Psychopaths are deficient in the emotions that we generally attribute with morality according to Prinz and hence, treat moral norms as social conventions.

Prinz (2011) claims that emotion along with reasoning helps us making moral judgments. Reasoning alone cannot instill new moral values. Reason can only help us analyze the choices, tease out the inconsistencies in a situation but cannot direct us to the choice we must make.

Let us note here that Prinz's arguments are largely based on the emotions associated with the morally wrong and not the morally right. One could argue that if the cup is half full it is half empty, but it does make one curious to venture down the alley of 'do we have positive emotions associated with morally right judgments'. Are emotional correlates of moral wrongness our only way of finding the morally right? Is it that only if a disapproving or aversive emotion is not experienced in an act, then, we can conclude it to be right? Also, the research on emotion revolves around strong moral conflicts for which society does not provide straight forward answers. In more simple moral judgments of everyday life that determine our behavior, do such emotions come into play and to what degree? Even if emotions were the causal determinants of the notion of morality, we would still have to answer the question of whether these emotions themselves are innate or culturally derived.

#### **5. Is Morality Innate or Culturally Evolved**

Prinz (2008) argues that morality is not innate. He says that we can prove it innate by finding a universally moral norm. But, we seem to find violations in some culture or the other of just about every moral norm we can think of. This is a tenable argument. He also argues against proponents of the view that children pick up moral rules and differentiate them from conventional ones without teaching them. Moral rules include norms like 'do not harm others', 'do not steal', while conventional rules include dress codes, social etiquettes etc. many of which we see children violating. He says that morality is acquired and children acquire it because we give them feedback every time they violate a moral code and the nature of the feedback we give depending on the nature of the rule violated, moral or social, is different.

But, here, I would like to argue that if morality is not innate and is developed by a culture, how and why, then, do we differentiate between moral codes and conventional codes. Why then is it deemed so much more wrong when a moral code is broken than when a conventional code is broken? I see two possibilities here. Moral and conventional codes could differ only in the level of wrongness. For reasons unfathomable, moral codes are more wrong. Or, we can say moral codes and conventional codes differ in which can be reasoned and which lies beyond reason. Yes, killing is wrong. But, let us consider the following hypothetical question. "It is the nuclear age. You are the last but one man on earth. You have starved and will die if you do not eat. But, your only choice is to kill the other man. And it is important for you to live because are the sole carrier of certain genes that are needed for the survival of other human beings who have already been transported to Mars. Would you kill the man and eat him?" Pushed to the verge of moral breakdown, what would one decide? Clearly, killing is the option to be rationally chosen. Yet, one would shy away from it on the grounds of morality (let alone the unfathomable brutality involved). Is this where moral rules differ from conventional rules – in that they lie in a realm beyond reason? Or is Prinz correct in warranting a position based on mere emotional response to morally conflicting situations? In that case, morality seems to be a by-product of emotional responses set in place through years of social rejection.

Ayala (2010) tries to answer the question of the innateness of morality using an evolutionary approach. He derives largely from Darwin while saying that moral behavior is a necessary attribute of human intelligence and that moral norms are derived from collective human experience. Ayala says that we have the ability to anticipate consequences, our ability to make value judgments and our ability to choose from alternative courses of action, which are necessary for moral behavior. He calls this ability to judge some actions as good and some as bad as moral sense. The author says that being endowed with intelligence; we have a predisposed moral sense. But, the moral codes according to which such judgments are made have evolved culturally. This argument seems acceptable though one could question why moral codes should evolve in a culture. We can reason that moral codes are incorporated in cultures in anticipation of some benefit to the culture endowed by adhering to the norms. Such norms are reinforced by social acceptance and authority, and sometimes even religious beliefs.

In today's world, we have debates on vegetarianism and there are different groups of people following it because of the lack of a moral warrant. We are still at stark ends on whether killing animals for food is morally right, whether using them for experiments is morally right. There continues to exist, different factions of people that differ in their views. Is it for a lack of a strong emotional response? Along the evolutionary lineage, humans indulged in consumption of food by killing animals. Then, why would this sudden question of the moral rightness of what we have been doing for thousands of years arise? Will there be a day when we all will be vegetarians on the grounds of morality? We see here some kind of evolution of morality through cultural cohesion. This implies even if there are inherent moral, universal rules that we are predisposed with, which we have argued against, they are liable to change by cultural factors or cultural evolution. Today, we think that not to harm others is a fundamental moral tenet. Was it always the case? It is possible that early humans were cannibals and did not differentiate between humans and animals when fulfilling hunger needs? The moral commandment of 'do not harm others' appears obvious to us now. But, just like vegetarianism would probably evolve to be the norm of the day sometime in future, the 'do not harm others' moral norm could have evolved in the past and not have been present inherently.

Did the caveman think 'do not steal'? Stealing was possibly one mode of survival for the caveman, yet, some community tacitly arrived at a consensus on morally condemning and today, the moral norm is as obvious to us as it seems. The concept becomes conceivable if we think that only 200 years ago, our ancestors indulged in slavery, while, today, we find the idea of slavery utterly barbaric. Something brought about the cultural change that has today evolved to become part of our moral code and through eventual social consensus and reinforced by reason and emotion.

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